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JOHN WINN: Support more AP coursework

By John Winn

We can't be more proud of the achievement of our American athletes in the Olympics this year. Their training was first class. As a result, the United States scored the overall lead in the medal count with 110.

But what was less ballyhooed was the news that America's students aren't competing as well as its athletes. Their training ground -- our public schools -- could not meet the rigor of other countries. International "Education Olympics" comparisons released the same week showed the United States earned just one medal when matched against other countries.

The data compiled by the Fordham Institute from the most recent international test measures showed the only area that the United States excelled in, when compared to its international competitors, was civic education, the ability to analyze political current events. Finland and Hong Kong led the Education Olympics with dozens of medals in core subjects like reading, math and science, followed by Singapore, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, New Zealand, Canada and Estonia.

It was one more warning sign that American students are failing to keep up in critical areas like math and science -- at a time when 80 percent of the jobs in the future will require math and science skill.

But that is a downward trend that educators in Alabama are working hard to reverse.

Thanks to a \$13.2 million grant to A+ College Ready from the National Math and Science Initiative, four Montgomery schools and eight in Jefferson County are making dramatic progress in getting more students to take more challenging math, science and English classes.

This fall, a record 2,752 students will be enrolled in Advanced Placement math, science and English courses in schools that are receiving training and financial incentives from A+ College Ready. That's a whopping 130 percent increase over the 1,195 who enrolled last year at the same time.

The increase confirms that American students will indeed take on more rigorous work if the advanced courses are made available and they are encouraged to take on the challenge.

But more support is needed. A+ College Ready, a non-profit organization, has received \$800,000 from the Alabama Power Foundation and Regions Financial Corp. to supplement the grant from the National Math and Science Initiative. With even more local and state support, the number of students in more rigorous AP courses could be doubled and tripled.

Experience has shown that the AP program - which provides college-level coursework in high school -- significantly increases college readiness. Students passing AP exams are three times more likely to earn a college degree than students who do not pass.

And when it comes to international competition, AP students in the United States are internationally competitive in math and science, while their non-AP counterparts are not. American AP calculus and physics students' scores rank at or near the top against all other countries, while the non-AP counterparts in the United States were at or near the bottom.

A+ College Ready, a division of the Montgomery-based A+ Education Foundation, wants to make that academic success available to more Alabama students. Our program makes it possible to pay AP teachers to attend training seminars and to receive coaching from experienced AP teachers. The teachers also receive stipends to compensate them for the extra work involved in teaching AP and students receive

mini-scholarships for each qualifying score on a math, science or English AP exam.

What this ultimately adds up to is an Alabama workforce that is better prepared to compete in the global economy.

John Winn is chief program officer for the National Math and Science Initiative.
